

Prometheus Bound

Prometheus Bound (Ancient Greek: Προμηθεὺς Δεσμώτης, *Promētheús Desmótēs*) is an Ancient Greek tragedy traditionally attributed to Aeschylus and thought to have been composed sometime between 479 BC and the terminus ante quem of 424 BC.^{[1][2]} The tragedy is based on the myth of Prometheus, a Titan who defies Zeus, and protects and gives fire to mankind, for which he is subjected to the wrath of Zeus and punished.

C. J. Herington claims that Aeschylus certainly did not mean for *Prometheus Bound* to be a "self-contained dramatic unity", and suggests that "most modern students of the subject would probably agree" that *Prometheus Bound* was followed by a work with the title *Prometheus Lyomenos* (*Prometheus Unbound*). Herington adds that "some very slight evidence" indicates that *Prometheus Unbound* "may have been followed by a third play", *Prometheus Pyrphoros* (*Prometheus the Fire-Bearer*); the latter two survive only in fragments.^[3] Some scholars have proposed that these fragments all originated from *Prometheus Unbound*, and that there were only two Promethean plays rather than three. Since the final two dramas of the trilogy have been lost, the author's intention for the work as a whole is not known.

The ascription to Aeschylus had never been challenged since antiquity down to relatively recent times.^[a] By the 1970s, both R. P. Winnington-Ingram and Denys Page had become sceptical of its authenticity, but the majority of scholars still affirmed the traditional attribution of authorship.^[b] Independently in 1977 both Oliver Taplin and Mark Griffith made forceful cases, on linguistic, technical and stagecraft grounds, for questioning its authenticity, a view supported by M. L. West. To date, no consensus on the matter has been established, though recent computerized stylometric analysis has thrown the burden of proof on those who uphold the traditional claim.^{[9][10]}

Prometheus Bound



Prometheus Being Chained by Vulcan by Dirck van Baburen

Written by Aeschylus

Chorus Oceanids

Characters Cratus

Bia

Hephaestus

Prometheus

Oceanus

Io

Hermes

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Synopsis

The play opens with four characters on stage, a feature unique to the surviving corpus of Greek tragedy.^[11] Kratos and Bia, personifications of brute power and callous violence respectively, are engaged in fettering the silent Prometheus to a mountainside in Scythia, and are assisted in the task by the begrudging blacksmith of the gods, Hephaestus.^{[12][13]} -Before the play begins, Kronos, the ruler of the pre-Olympian gods (the Titans), had been overthrown by an insurgency led by Zeus. In that revolt, Prometheus had sided with Zeus. As the new king, Zeus intended to destroy and replace humankind. Prometheus frustrated this plan, showing humans the use of fire, which Prometheus had stolen. Prometheus also taught humanity the arts. For these acts of defiance, Zeus intends to punish Prometheus by chaining him to a rock in the mountains of Scythia.

At the outset of the play Prometheus is seen accompanied by two faithful proxies^[14] of Zeus, namely who will see to it that Zeus's punishment is carried out. Also begrudgingly present is Hephaestus, whose skills are needed to apply the hardware used to fasten Prometheus to the rock. Zeus, an off-stage character in this play, is portrayed as a tyrannical leader.

Only one of Zeus's two agents, Kratos, speaks in this scene, and he announces his orders harshly and insolently. Kratos states that the punishment meted out to Prometheus is due to the fact he stole fire and revealed the secret of how it is produced to humanity, adding that the punitive measure taken will compel Prometheus to take cognizance of the sovereignty of Zeus. For Prometheus, his punishment occurs because he dared to rescue mankind from being annihilated by Zeus. The penalty exacted is particularly galling since he himself had been instrumental in securing Zeus's victory in the Titanomachy.

Hephaestus performs his task, shackling Prometheus to the mountain, whereupon all three exit, leaving Prometheus alone on stage. Prometheus now speaks, and appeals to the powers of Nature, which are all around him. He calls on the wind, the mountains' springs of water, the Earth and the Sun — to witness how he suffers unfairly. Somewhat elliptically he intuits what the future might portend in positive terms, and his outrage diminishes.

Prometheus becomes aware that something is approaching. He hears the beating of wings, and inhales the scent of the ocean. A chorus enters, made up of the daughters of Oceanus. From within their deep sea-caves, they had heard the sound of the hammering, and were drawn by curiosity and fear. They have arrived without stopping to put on their sandals. Before they come closer, they hover in the air just above Prometheus, who hints to them that he is keeping a secret that will eventually cause him to have power over Zeus. The chorus thinks that he is speaking out of anger, and may not actually be prophetic. Responding to their questions, Prometheus tells the story of his offense against Zeus admitting that it was deliberate. He complains that the punishment is too harsh. At last, Prometheus invites the chorus to stop hovering and come down to earth, to listen to more of what he has to say. They agree, and arrange themselves downstage in order to listen.

Prometheus' story is interrupted by the entrance of Oceanus — the father of the chorus of nymphs. Oceanus arrives in a carriage drawn by a winged beast — a griffin. Oceanus is an older god, a Titan son of Earth, who has made peace with Zeus. He has heard of Prometheus' troubles, and has come to offer some sympathy and advice. Prometheus is proud, and is hurt by this offer. Prometheus responds coldly, and wonders why Oceanus would leave his caves and streams to see such a miserable sight chained to a rock. Prometheus suggests that Oceanus should not intervene, out of concern for his own safety. Oceanus is annoyed by this, but wants to help, and offers to leave only when Prometheus tells him that if he attempts to intervene it will only increase the punishment Prometheus is suffering. Oceanus notes that his winged beast is eager to get home to his own stable, and he exits.

Prometheus is alone again with the chorus of Oceanus' daughters, who did not speak while their father was visiting. Prometheus speaks to the chorus of Ocean nymphs. He asks pardon for his silence, which is because he was thinking about the ingratitude of the gods. He describes the positive things he had done for humans. In the so-called Catalogue of the Arts (447-506), he reveals that he taught men all the civilizing arts, such as writing, medicine, mathematics, astronomy, metallurgy, architecture, and agriculture. He suggests that he will one day be unchained, but it will be due to the intervention of Necessity, which is something directed by Fate, not Zeus. When asked how that will happen, he keeps it secret. The Chorus sings an Ode that is a prayer that they will never cross Zeus.

Io, the daughter of Inachus, king of Argos, arrives. Io had become the object of Zeus's affections and desires, which angered Zeus's wife, Hera. Io's father was advised to banish his daughter from his house, which he does. Io then wanders the Earth. Hera turned Io into a heifer and the herder Argus drove her from land to land. After Argus was killed by Hermes, a new torment was inflicted on Io — a plague of gad-flies. She has now arrived at the desolate place where Prometheus is chained. Prometheus is familiar with her story, and she recognizes him as the great friend to humans. The chorus doesn't know Io's past, and persuades Prometheus to let Io tell them. The chorus is shocked and saddened and asks Prometheus to tell of Io's future wanderings. He hesitates because he knows it will be painful.

A brief dialogue reveals that Prometheus and Io are both victims of Zeus and that in the future Prometheus will eventually be freed by the descendants of Io. Prometheus asks Io to choose: Does she want to hear the rest of her own future, or the name of her descendant that will rescue him? The chorus interrupts — they want both: One answer for Io and one for themselves. Prometheus foresees that Io's wanderings will end at the mouth of the Nile. There Zeus will restore her. She will give birth to a son, Epaphus, who will father fifty daughters, all of whom will murder their husbands, except for one, who will bear a line of kings, and another one who will rescue Prometheus from his torment. Prometheus' future rescuer is not named, but is known to be Heracles.^[15] Io bounds away.

Prometheus proclaims that no matter how great Zeus may be, his reign will eventually come to an end. Zeus may do his worst, but it will not be forever. The chorus express caution, which he responds to with even more defiance. Prometheus's words have reached Zeus, whose messenger, Hermes, appears to urge Prometheus to reveal his secret about the marriage that threatens Zeus. Hermes reveals Zeus' own threats — the earthquake, the fall of the mountain that will bury Prometheus, the eagle that will attack Prometheus's vital organs. Prometheus states again that he knows all that is to come and will endure it. Prometheus warns the chorus to stand aside. They don't. The end comes: Earthquake, dust-storm, jagged lightning, whirlwind. As Zeus blasts Prometheus to Tartarus down in the bowels of the earth, Prometheus has the last line of the play: "O holy mother mine, O you firmament that revolves the common light of all, you see the wrongs I suffer!" Prometheus vanishes along with the chorus.^[16]

Textual styles

The play is composed of dialogues between the different characters, including, Io, Ocean, Nature, and with the chorus. The dialogue contains a sustained stichomythia between Prometheus and Oceanus, and also a unique series of quatrains sung by the chorus.

Departures from Hesiod

Hesiod's Works and Days and Theogony, written circa 700 BC, are early and major sources for stories of Greek mythology, and sources for Aeschylus. Hesiod's Theogony contains the starting point for Aeschylus' play, which was written more than two centuries later. However by the time that Aeschylus read the Theogony, it had accrued significant additions that are now part of the extant version. Parts of those additions — including the story of Hercules killing the eagle — are essential to Aeschylus' conception of *Prometheus Bound*. Aeschylus also added his own variations. For example, in Hesiod Prometheus' efforts to outwit Zeus are simply presented, without noting that Zeus' response is overly cruel, or that Prometheus' actions might be justified — that Zeus became angry was enough for Hesiod to report without question. Aeschylus looks at those events in Hesiod, and sees intolerable injustice.^[17]

Another departure by Aeschylus from Hesiod's Theogony involves the two forms of punishment of Prometheus — the chaining to a rock, and the eagle's daily tearing of his liver. In the version of the Theogony that Aeschylus was familiar with, which is also the extant version known to modern readers, the two punishments are presented as one story. It was Aeschylus, who instead decided to separate the tortures, and have the eagle begin tearing at Prometheus' liver only after the chained Prometheus had refused to reveal the secrets that Zeus wanted to know.^[18] Aeschylus' alterations have been maintained by literature that followed *Prometheus Bound*.^[17]

Hesiod portrays Prometheus as a lowly trickster and semi-comic foil to Zeus's authority. Zeus's anger toward Prometheus is in turn responsible for mortal man's having to provide for himself; before, all of man's needs had been provided by the gods. Prometheus' theft of fire also prompts the arrival of the first woman, Pandora, and her jar of evils. Pandora is entirely absent from *Prometheus Bound*, where Prometheus becomes a human benefactor and divine king-maker, rather than an object of blame for human suffering.^[19]

Prometheus Trilogy

There is evidence that *Prometheus Bound* was the first play in a trilogy conventionally called the Prometheia, but the other two plays, *Prometheus Unbound* and *Prometheus the Fire-Bringer*, survive only in fragments. In *Prometheus Unbound*, Heracles frees Prometheus from his chains and kills the eagle that had been sent daily to eat the Titan's perpetually regenerating liver. Perhaps foreshadowing his eventual reconciliation with Prometheus, we learn that Zeus has released the other Titans whom he imprisoned at the conclusion of the Titanomachy. In *Prometheus the Fire-Bringer*, the Titan finally warns Zeus not to lie with the sea nymph Thetis, for she is fated to give birth to a son greater than the father. Not wishing to be overthrown, Zeus would later marry Thetis off to the mortal Peleus; the product of that union will be Achilles, Greek hero of the Trojan War. Grateful for the warning, Zeus finally reconciles with Prometheus.



Prometheus Bound: staging by MacMillan Films in 2015

Questions regarding authorship

Scholars of the Great Library of Alexandria considered Aeschylus to be the author of *Prometheus Bound*. Since the 19th century, however, doubts began to emerge, after Rudolf Westphal, in 1857 and again in 1869, challenged the idea that the text was the work of a single author.^[20] In 1911, A. Gercke became the first scholar to reject the Aeschylean ascription, while dismissing the notion that a Prometheus trilogy itself existed.^[21] Two years later his student F. Niedzballa likewise concluded the text was written by someone else, on the basis of lexical analysis of words in the play not recurrent elsewhere in Aeschylus.^[22] Some have raised doubts focused on matters of linguistics, meter, vocabulary, and style, notably by Mark Griffith, though he remained open to idea that uncertainty persists and the traditional attribution might turn out to be correct.^{[c][d]} Griffith's views were challenged in brief by Günther Zuntz^[23] and in great detail by Maria Pia Pattoni in 1987.^[24] M. L. West found the evidence against the ascription 'overwhelming'^[25] and, after editing all seven plays, wrote an extended analysis and review of Griffith, Zuntz and Pattoni's work concluding that ascription to Aeschylus was untenable and contextualizing the as the product of the 440s-430s era.^[26]

Some scholars note that certain themes in the play appear to be foreign to Aeschylus, when compared to the themes in his other plays. The scholar Wilhelm Schmid argues that the playwright who demonstrated such piety toward Zeus in *The Suppliants* and *Agamemnon* could not have been the same playwright who in *Prometheus Bound* inveighs against Zeus for violent tyranny.^{[27][28]} M. L. West argued that *Prometheus Bound* may be the work of Aeschylus' son, Euphorion, who was also a playwright.^[29]

Responses to some of these questions have included the suggestion that the strongest characteristic of the play is in the humanity of their portrayal. The mythological and religious aspects are treated as secondary compared to the clash of wills that occurs between Zeus and Prometheus. The rebellion of Prometheus was not invented by Aeschylus, who only breathed the human spirit into older forms.^[30] This play, *Prometheus Bound*, only contains a part of the story. In the sequel, Aeschylus would have had the chance to give to Zeus' character an arc, and show him learning and developing more admirable and generous aspects. Coming later in the trilogy, a benevolent Zeus would have a deeper impact. In this play Zeus does not appear — we learn of the tyranny of Zeus, only from those who suffer from it. Characters' views need not be identical with the author's.^[28]

Dating the play

A reference (lines 363-372) to the eruption of Mount Aetna in 479 suggests that *Prometheus Bound* may date from later than this event. The play cannot date later than 430 BC, because *Prometheus Unbound* (part of the same trilogy as *Prometheus Bound*) was parodied in Cratinus' *Ploutoi* (429 BC). *Prometheus Bound* was then parodied in Cratinus' *Seriphioi* (c. 423) and Aristophanes' *Acharnians* (425 BC).^[31]

Reception and influence

Prometheus Bound enjoyed a measure of popularity in antiquity. Aeschylus was very popular in Athens decades after his death, as Aristophanes' *The Frogs* (405 BC) makes clear. Allusions to the play are evident in his *The Birds* of 414 BC, and in the tragedian Euripides' fragmentary *Andromeda*, dated to 412 BC. If Aeschylean authorship is assumed, then these allusions several decades after the play's first performance speak to the enduring popularity of *Prometheus Bound*. Moreover, a performance of the play itself (rather than a depiction of the generic myth) appears on fragments of a Greek vase dated c. 370–360 BC.).^[32]

In the early 19th century, the Romantic writers came to identify with the defiant Prometheus. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe wrote a poem on the theme, as did Lord Byron. Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote a play, *Prometheus Unbound*, which used some of the materials of the play as a vehicle for Shelley's own vision.

Performance in the English language

In 1979 George Eugeniou directed and performed in the play at Theatro Technis London setting the drama in the Greece governed by the Junta. George Eugeniou, Koraltan Ahmet and Angelique Rockas played roles.^[33]

A translation of the play by Joel Agee, commissioned by the J. Paul Getty Museum, the CalArts Center for New Performance, and Trans Arts, was first performed from 29 August to 28 September 2013 at the Getty Villa's Outdoor Classical Theater. It was directed by Travis Preston, composed by Ellen Reid and Vinny Golia, and choreographed by Mira Kingsley.^[34] The production employed a huge, steel wheel in place of the barren cliff.^[35]

In April 2015 MacMillan Films, in the United States, staged *Prometheus Bound* for camera using Peter Arnott's translation with James Thomas directing, Tanya Rodina as Io, and Casey McIntyre as the Chorus Leader. The production used a real *skene* building whose roof was the landing and dance platform for the Chorus of Oceanids.

Translations

- Thomas Medwin, 1832 — verse: full text (<https://archive.org/details/prometheusboun02aes>) 1837 (Pagan Press reprint 2011)
- Percy Bysshe Shelley, 1832 — verse: Prometheus Unbound full text (https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Prometheus_Unbound:_a_lyrical_drama_in_four_acts_with_other_poems/Prometheus_Unbound)
- Elizabeth Barrett Browning, writing anonymously, 1833 — verse: full text (<https://archive.org/details/prometheusboun01aescgoog>)
- Henry David Thoreau, 1843 — verse: full text (<https://web.archive.org/web/20120126025452/http://www.walden.org/documents/file/Library/About%20Thoreau/D/Dial/PrometheusBound.pdf>)
- Henry William Herbert, 1849 — verse: Google ebook (<https://archive.org/details/prometheusandag00herbgoog>)
- Theodore Alois Buckley, 1849 — prose: full text (https://archive.org/stream/tragediesschylu00aescgoog/tragediesschylu00aescgoog_djvu.txt)
- Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 1851 — verse: full text (<https://archive.org/details/prometheusboun02browgoog>) (completely different translation from her 1833 version)
- Charles Cavendish Clifford, 1852 — verse: Google ebook (https://books.google.com.au/books?id=SbUgAW_F1yYC&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false)
- Augusta Webster, 1866 — verse: full text (<https://archive.org/details/prometheusboun00websgoog>)
- C. B. Cayley, 1867 — verse: full text (<https://archive.org/details/prometheusboun00aescgoog>)
- Edward Hayes Plumptre, 1868 — verse: full text (<http://www.bartleby.com/8/4/>)
- Anna Swanwick, 1886 — verse full text ([https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Dramas_of_Aeschylus_\(Swanwick\)/Prometheus_Bound](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Dramas_of_Aeschylus_(Swanwick)/Prometheus_Bound))
- John Dunning Cooper, 1890
- 4th Earl of Carnarvon, 1892
- Herbert Hailstone, 1892
- Edward Henry Pember, 1895 — verse: full text (<https://archive.org/details/voyageofphocan00pemb>)

- [George Denman](#), 1896 — verse
- [Paul Elmer More](#), 1899 — prose and verse: [full text](https://archive.org/details/prometheusbound01scgoog) (<https://archive.org/details/prometheusbound01scgoog>)
- [Edwyn Bevan](#), 1902 — verse [full text](https://archive.org/details/prometheusbound0daesc00rich) (<https://archive.org/details/prometheusbound0daesc00rich>)
- [J. Case](#), 1905 — verse
- [John Stuart Blackie](#), 1906 — verse: [full text](http://oll.libertyfund.org/index.php?option=com_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=1039&layout=html) (http://oll.libertyfund.org/index.php?option=com_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=1039&layout=html)
- [Robert Whitelaw](#), 1907 — verse: [full text](https://archive.org/details/prometheusbound03aes00cgoog) (<https://archive.org/details/prometheusbound03aes00cgoog>)
- [E. D. A. Morshead](#), 1908 — verse: [full text](http://www.gutenberg.org dirs/etext05/8aesp10.txt) (<http://www.gutenberg.org dirs/etext05/8aesp10.txt>)
- [Walter George Headlam](#) and [C. E. S. Headlam](#), 1909 — prose [full text](https://archive.org/details/aeschylusplays00aesciala) (<https://archive.org/details/aeschylusplays00aesciala>)
- [Marion Clyde Wier](#), 1916 — verse: [full text](https://archive.org/details/pro00metheusbound0aeschrich) (<https://archive.org/details/pro00metheusbound0aeschrich>)
- [G. M. Cookson](#), 1924 — verse: [full text](https://web.archive.org/web/20090107185646/http://etext.library.adelaide.edu.au/a/aeschylus/prometheus/) (<https://web.archive.org/web/20090107185646/http://etext.library.adelaide.edu.au/a/aeschylus/prometheus/>)
- [Herbert Weir Smyth](#), 1926 — prose: [full text](https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?lookup=aesch.+pb+1) (<https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?lookup=aesch.+pb+1>)
- [Clarence W. Mendell](#), 1926 — verse
- [Robert C. Trevelyan](#), 1939 — verse
- [David Grene](#), 1942 — prose and verse
- [E. A. Havelock](#), 1950 — prose and verse
- [F. L. Lucas](#), 1954 — verse
- [Philip Vellacott](#), 1961 — verse
- [Paul Roche](#), 1964 — verse
- [Robert Lowell](#), 1967 — prose
- [C. John Herrington](#) and [James Scully](#), 1975 — verse
- [G. Theodoridis](#), prose, 2006 — prose: [full text](http://bacchicstage.wordpress.com/aeschylus-2/prometheus-bound/) (<http://bacchicstage.wordpress.com/aeschylus-2/prometheus-bound/>)
- [Alan Sommerstein](#), 2008 — prose
- [Ian C. Johnston](#), 2012 — verse: [full text](http://johnstoniatexts.x10host.com/aeschylus/prometheusboundhtml.html) (<http://johnstoniatexts.x10host.com/aeschylus/prometheusboundhtml.html>)
- [Deborah H. Roberts](#), 2012 — verse
- [Joel Agee](#), 2013 — verse
- [James Romm](#), 2016 — verse

See also

- [Prometheus Unbound](#) and [Prometheus the Fire-Bringer](#), which are believed to be the sequels
- [Prometheus Unbound](#), a four-act lyrical drama by [Percy Bysshe Shelley](#), inspired by the Greek tragedy
- [Prométhée](#), the opera by [Gabriel Fauré](#), partly based on the first half of *Prometheus Bound*

Notes

- a. 'The climate of opinion has certainly changed since my undergraduate days the fifties when only those studying Prometheus as a special option ever heard that its authenticity had been questioned, and this was presented as a curiosity of scholarship and a dreadful aberration from the plain truth.'^[4] 'Ancient scholarship from the Hellenistic period onwards had no doubts about Prometheus Bound's Aeschylean authorship... this silence is not decisive.. Modern anxieties about the reliability of the ascription to Aeschylus stem from nineteenth-century scholarship, which, particularly in Germany, was keen to spot where plays had been modified or reworked by a later hand.. In the twentieth century, critics recognized that the oddities of the Prometheus Bound could not be localized and introduced the idea that the play was not by Aeschylus at all'^{[5][6]}
- b. 'the majority of classical scholars still accept the Aeschylean authorship of the play (which was not questioned in antiquity).'^[7] 'The vast majority of scholars are in no doubt that *Prometheus* is entirely the work of Aeschylus.'^[8]
- c. 'I should stress that the discovery tomorrow of a scrap of papyrus, confirming Aeschylus as author, would in no way astonish me. We know too little to be certain about anything' (Griffith 1977, p. xi)
- d. 'With limited evidence available to us for comparison (less than one-tenth of Aeschylus' oeuvre) we cannot hope for certainty one way or the other.' (Griffith 2007, p. 34)

Citations

1. Flintoff 1986, pp. 82–91.
2. Ruffell 2012, pp. 14–18, 18.
3. Herington 1973–1974, p. 665.
4. West 2015, p. 54.
5. Ruffell 2012, p. 14.
6. Griffith 2007, p. 32,n.103.
7. Conacher 1980, p. 21.
8. Taplin 1989, p. 460.
9. Manousakis 2020.
10. Barrios-Lech 2021.
11. Taplin 1989, p. 240.
12. Conacher 1980, pp. 32–33.
13. Taplin 1989, pp. 240–241.
14. Taplin 1989, p. 242.
15. *Prometheus Bound*.
16. Griffith 2007, p. 76-78 and 280.
17. Solmsen 1995, pp. 124–134.
18. Solmsen 1995, p. 125.
19. Lamberton 1988, pp. 90–104.
20. Griffith 2007, p. 32, n.103.
21. Manousakis 2020, p. 28.
22. Manousakis 2020, p. 29.
23. Zuntz 1983, pp. 498–499.
24. Pattoni 1987.
25. West 1979, pp. 130–148, 130.
26. West 2015, pp. 65–67.
27. Schmid 1929.
28. Conacher 1980, pp. 142–174.
29. West 2015, pp. 168–171.
30. Herington 2015.
31. West 2015, p. 65.
32. DeVries 1993, pp. 517–523.
33. Theatricalia.
34. Boehm 2013.
35. Behrens 2013.

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